

Many Deceivers
First UMC of Pocatello
January 15, 2023

2 John

Are you ready to talk about heresy?

Now, some of you probably just clammed up a bit and started sweating. Some of you might've leaned forward and started salivating. And some of you good, sweet, lifelong Methodists probably scratched your heads and thought, "Oh yea, heresy... what's that again?"

Heresy. Heresy comes from a benign, ordinary Greek word that simply meant *choice*. But in the early centuries of the Christian movement, the word became supercharged with the idea that heresy was a choice that deviated from or outright defied the agreed upon, "correct" teachings of the institutional Church. Heresy has been around since the beginning of Christianity. When you go through confirmation or read up on Christian history you learn about the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople and Chalcedon where the early Christian fathers, bishops, and political leaders hammered out statements of faith that they expected Christians everywhere to adopt and assent to. To not do so was to be a heretic. It's worth saying that no other world religion has shed more blood or committed more sins in the name of expunging itself of heretics than ours.

Today, the idea of heresy persists, though we may not always use that word. Often, in academic circles, heretics of old are looked upon with curiosity and compassion; their ideas tend to be interesting, and when you look at them in context, you realize that they held them for reasons of personal and cultural importance. In more fundamentalist circles, heresy is the unforgiveable sin; to not assent to every jot and tittle of church doctrine becomes cause for your removal from participation or membership in the community. And then, as I quipped a bit humorously, for many of us there's just not a robust sense any more of what heresy means, what bearing it has on the communal, institutional life of a church. What qualifies as heresy in 2023?

The letter of 2 John offers a unique opportunity to consider the idea of heresy long before creedal heresy ever existed. What I mean is: long before powerful Christians got together to produce universal, binding statements of belief, there were individual congregations working out for themselves on the ground in real time what sorts of beliefs, practices, and behaviors were advantageous for living out the life of the gospel – and which were not. In 2 John, we get the idea of heresy offered to us in the raw terms of truth and deception. It seems to have everything to do, not with a deviation from ecclesial doctrine, but with an intentional distortion of the person and work of Jesus. It seems that the heretic, the deceiver, can be identified by their efforts to divide, rather than to enlarge and to enrich, the Christian community.

I'm sure you heard that word *antichrist* in there. Important to know that at the time this letter was written, about 90 or 100 CE, only 60 or 70 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, *antichrist* simply meant to be “against Christ.” It didn't come to suggest that singular, apocalyptic figure who would come at the end of time to war against the saints of God and plunge the world into darkness until the 3rd and 4th centuries. Here, the writer of this letter, who calls himself the “elder,” actually *invents* the word. It simply means what who stands *against* the way, the love, the movement of Jesus in the world.

The elder's message to his church community is clear: abide in the truth, love one another, and do not the deceivers who are distorting the work of Christ into your house. What was the deceiver preaching? That Christ had not come in the flesh.

I'll buy a cup coffee for anyone who can shout out the term for the heresy which holds that Christ did not come in the flesh.

Docetism. From the Greek word *dokein* which means *to seem, or appear*. Jesus only *seemed* to be human, he only *appeared* to be human. In reality, his body was not flesh and blood and bone but some sort of celestial or bodily substance. One the reasons Docetism arose was because of the discomfort some had with the reality that in Christ God suffered. If Jesus was a human person, then his sufferings were real, and God has suffered all that we suffer. That seemed to compromise God's power and unchanging nature. The way around it was to suggest that Christ's humanity and his sufferings were illusions.

What is at stake for us in believing that Christ came in the flesh?

I'd like to offer three answers to that question.

The first is *ethics* – how we treat one another. If Christ had not come in the flesh, if salvation was not a full transformation of the human person but simply an intellectual idea, then it belongs to the privileged who know, and there's nothing to curtail the exclusion of persons with certain kinds of bodies from full participation in the church. Because, hey, all that matters is that we all *believe* the same thing; don't worry about who has authority and access in the church. It's like this: If you believe that your budget has nothing to do with your marriage, that's probably because you want to keep spending your money however you'd like. If you believe that salvation has nothing to do with the body, you probably believe that so that you can control and organize which bodies have power and which bodies do not have power. Someone else's body, instead of Jesus', gets to take center stage as the arbiter of bodies. If Christ has not come in the flesh, we can say to others, "God loves you. You'll be saved if you believe in him. *But... but* when it comes to the church, *but* when it comes to the call and anointing of the spirit, *but* when it comes to having full and equal access to positions of leadership, *you have the wrong body*. You have a woman's body. You have a differently abled body. You have a nonwhite body. You have a queer body. You can be saved! But you can't *belong*." And that leads to a whole messed up knot of really bad ethics.

But if Jesus has come in the flesh and his body gets to take center stage. His is a poor Galilean body, a body hunted by Herod, anointed for burial by Mary, pierced by soldiers, hoisted up among criminals, dying and then dead. Then, miraculously, gloriously resurrected in the flesh. Jesus has come in the flesh because God cares about what happens to us as *people*, as these creatures with bodies. God holds us accountable to our essential vulnerability by sharing in that vulnerability with us. God shows us what it means to be in solidarity with those bodies that are especially vulnerable. So, ethics is at stake if Christ has not come in the flesh.

The second thing that's at stake is *belonging*. Which is the fruit of good ethics. Jesus took upon himself a human mind, a human will, flesh and blood and bone, lungs and a heart. He hungered, he thirsted, he suffered. He had hands and feet, a liver, a distinct laugh. He had hormones and a sex drive. He had a relationship to gender. None of these things was deemed too lowly or shameful or complicated for him to bring inside his own life. Because he

belonged to all that we are, all of us – all that makes us *us* – belongs *to him*. There is no part of ourselves that God does not want to have a say about or have access to, or be glorified within. So, the unreal fatigue of being a parent of small children belongs in the Christian life. God cares about that and can meet us in that. Our times of weariness and sickness: God cares about that and can meet us in that. Our aging: God cares about that and can meet us inside of that. Our ecstatic experiences of encountering something beautiful: God cares about that and can meet us in that. We meet God in everything because everything was met by God in Jesus.

Because Christ has come in the flesh, the important work set before the church is to help everyone experience themselves, their bodies, as a dwelling place of glory. We are all called to open up every dimension of ourselves – physical, emotional, social, intellectual, sexual – to the infusion of divine presence that we are capable of receiving. Rather than trafficking in shame or in repression or exclusion, which is what you can do if you deny the union of Christ with the flesh – rather than that, the church is called to help every person belong.

The third thing that's at stake in Christ coming in the flesh: ethics, belonging, and: *holiness*. Holiness. Knowing ourselves to be the sacred abode of God's spirit. If Christ took upon himself the fullness of human nature and achieved through it the perfect love of God and neighbor, fulfilled the greatest commandment, then we can have hope that over the course of our lives, we might not just open ourselves fully to God, belong fully to God, but be transformed fully into the image of Christ and love ever more perfectly day by day.

An early church father, Gregory of Nazianzus once wrote that whatever is not assumed or taken up by Christ is not healed. But because Christ assumed it all, took it all upon himself, all that we are can be healed and transformed.

It was to impress upon us the importance of knowing Christ in the flesh, of noticing who is and is not at the Table; it was to offer us a place of belonging; it was to transfigure us through the nourishment of physical substance – that Jesus told us we would know his body in the bread, and his love in the cup.

As I said at the very beginning, heresy used to just mean choice. In this case, the choice really matters. Will we choose to confess an enfleshed, incarnate Christ? Will we choose to follow him into all the riches and ecstasies and travails of being creatures with bodies? Will we choose to stand alongside others with vulnerable bodies? Or will we deny the body so as to control those we fear or don't understand? Will we enlarge the family or divide it? Will we place just pieces of who we are before Him, or every facet of our being?

Let us walk in the truth. Let us walk in the way of his commandment. Let us love another and proclaim with all our strength that Christ has come in the flesh.

Amen.